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Book Review: The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers

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THE RISE AND FALL OF THE GREAT POWERS

*Paul Kennedy
Vintage, 1988*

By Michael J. Kryzanek

Where the 1980's has been preoccupied with personal gain and self-aggrandizement, the 1990's may very well become a decade in which Americans begin to re-evaluate themselves, their country and their future. Concern over the excesses of the "me" generation, new and foreboding social and environmental challenges, serious problems in key sectors such as education and manufacturing and the constant barrage of statistics claiming the superiority of Japan have forced Americans to examine the state of the United States and to speculate on whether our time in the sun may have indeed come to an end.

This process of introspection has been advanced by the publication of a number of books which seek to explore the current crisis of American confidence. Amidst this explosion of analysis and criticism, Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* is without question the best book to examine the issue of national decay and decline. Kennedy, a Yale historian, takes a wide lens view of history to investigate why the great powers — Greece, Rome, Spain, France, Germany and England — saw their influence and control diminish only to be replaced by new more powerful players in the international arena.

Kennedy is convinced that the rise and fall of great powers cannot be

attributed to random and unrelated circumstances. Rather Kennedy believes that the great powers all shared a common set of conditions that led to their eventual decline. Kennedy places heavy emphasis on the relationship between military expenditures and economic/technological change and the tendency of dominant nations to expand their influence and control beyond their reach in determining the ingredients for survival as a great power.

For nations to maintain their status, they must balance their expenditures relative to defense with investment in technology, take the necessary steps to sustain economic development and manage resources, and avoid what Kennedy calls "imperialist overreach." Excessive allocations for defense at the expense of research and development or ill-advised attempts to reassert control will eventually lead to a diminution of national power and perhaps even a permanent decline. As Kennedy points out with his detailed discussions of the decline of Spanish dominance in the 18th century and the reversal of British imperial pre-eminence after World War II, there must be a proper balance between defense, consumption and investment and an avoidance of "overstretch" if a great power is to maintain its greatness.

Kennedy provides the most cogent

analysis concerning his thesis when he examines the future direction of the current great powers — China, Europe, Japan, the Soviet Union and the United States. For those Americans caught in this crisis of confidence, Kennedy is not pessimistic about the future or convinced that a fall is in the offing. Kennedy, however, is critical of national leaders who have failed to recognize the importance of investing resources in those areas that will enhance our power and for squandering precious resources on grandiose and dangerous defense projects. According to Kennedy, this country still has the ability to manage the forces of change and regain the initiative in the international sphere, but major readjustments and sacrifices will be required.

The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers is one of those rare books that strikes at the heart of an age and defines the issues that a nation must face in order to survive. Paul Kennedy's painstaking examination of the reasons why nations are unable to maintain their great power status is essential reading for those concerned about the future of the United States. In this age of self-doubt where many believe that the United States is becoming the next Great Britain, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* may hold the key to avoiding that fate or describing accurately how it might happen. ■